

JEFFREY WAS IN deep conversation with an older man when she finally came back downstairs, but he immediately noticed her. She walked outside, onto the terrace.

People were staring at her—women with forced smiles on their lips. Everyone seemed to know what had just happened one floor higher.

Maybe she had been a tad too loud, she thought, feeling her cheeks flush a bit. It was all Ekbeth's fault. The man was a wizard. He had found all her sensitive places. She had lost control. Even now, from the top of her toes to the tip of her head, she was still tingling from his lovemaking.

It had been far too long since she had felt so passionately alive. She did not want to dwell on exactly how long, or who it had been. Ekbeth did not deserve any unfair comparison. He had been perfect.

“You were gone a long time!”

She accepted the glass from Jeffrey. “Some things need time!”

“True. And if you are wondering why everyone is staring

at you right now, yes, they too noticed you were gone with Ekbeth upstairs.”

She grinned, somehow relieved. “Only that? Good. I thought for a moment they had heard me as well.”

He shook his head. “God, no! That would have been really embarrassing! So I guess we can call this a success? Even though you’ve changed your target at the very last moment?”

She looked at the lake below. Night had always been her favorite time. You could barely make out the landscape, but the moon was full tonight, and it put an eerie light on everything.

“Shona?”

“What? Oh, yes. It was a success. In more aspects than you think. But you’ll have to wait to hear the details.”

He feigned shock. “I don’t want details!”

“Ah! You will want some of them, believe me! How long do you think we have to wait until we can make a polite exit?”

“The owner of the house does not want to show you anything else tonight?”

She shook her head, then caught his sudden grin. “What is your dirty mind thinking, Jeffrey? Ekbeth’s bodyguard was expecting us when we came back from the upper floor. The man had some urgent stuff to discuss which could not wait, he said. He just ignored me. Quite insulting actually. But I’m ready to bet that I won’t be allowed to approach his boss for the rest of the evening.”

Jeffrey’s grin only grew. “Clever of him. Yes, I noticed him as well. I think we should postpone leaving until the end of the fireworks. They should start any moment now.”

That surprised her. “Fireworks?”

“Yes. On the lake.”

“My! I’m so very glad we came tonight, Jeffrey! I wonder how Ekbeth managed this.”

“Money, girl. Money opens a lot of doors, even here.”

She nodded and sipped from her glass.

“Yes, it is convenient to be rich sometimes.”

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Two hours later, their plane left Zurich airport. For once, she did not complain about the uselessness, to her eyes, of using a private jet, nor the money Jeffrey had to give to arrange a night flight when the airport was officially closed.

She first got rid of her shoes. They were elegant, for sure, but new, and her feet were now hurting like hell. Then she rushed to the toilets. She had to stand and squirm to get to it. It was inserted deeper than she had thought, and it was big. What had she been thinking?

There was a knock on the door. “Are you okay, Shona? You’re not sick, are you?”

She cursed, tried another position. “I’m trying to respect your prudery, Jeffrey! Just leave me alone.”

She managed to extract the stone at last, with a loud grunt.

“What are you doing in there, Shona?”

Damn the man! She unlocked the door and opened it brusquely. She put the stone under his face. “This is what I was doing! Satisfied?”

Jeffrey looked at the flat circular sculpted piece of jade with a blank look at first, but that did not last long. “Where did this come from?”

“Jeffrey! I know even you can recognize that telling smell! Where else was I supposed to hide it with that dress?”

He shook his head, sternly. “That’s not what I’m asking. I mean, where did you take the jade stone from?”

She smiled smugly. “From Ekbeth’s safe.”

Jeffrey cursed, loudly, before clutching her shoulders and shaking her. “Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?”

She had expected that reaction, which was the reason she had not told him earlier. “Relax, Jeffrey, we are safe!”

He stopped shaking her, but did not release her shoulders. “Safe? This man, Ekbeth, is very powerful, Shona! And he has connections. Do you think he won’t guess who’s stolen this from him? And that he’ll let it go unpunished?”

She shrugged his hands off and walked calmly to the nearest seat. “But I want him to know who’s taken it from him, Jeffrey! Don’t you see? We are going to swap it against the Kadj’dur!”

Jeffrey put himself in the seat facing her, still fuming. “One small detail you may have forgotten: Ekbeth is not the owner of the ring! His cousin is!”

She ignored him. “This stone must be worth a lot! He had tons of other valuable jades displayed openly all around the room! But that one was in Ekbeth’s safe.”

“Why didn’t you take one of the others, then? Why go into his safe?”

“Because the rest were too big for me to smuggle away!”

She cleaned the stone with a corner of her dress. “Look at it, Jeffrey! It is ancient, I’m sure! Look at those little decorations! I’ve never seen anything like this before! Ekbeth will want it back! He’ll force his cousin to give us the ring!”

“Or he’ll find us, take the stone and kill us!”

She shook her head. “Him? He’s not the kind!”

“You are really underestimating the man, Shona! If not him, his bodyguard! Who is a nasty piece to handle from the reports I’ve seen, believe me!”

He sighed, took his head in his hands. “It was a perfect plan, Shona! Go to the party, seduce Lyrian Farrill, eventually discover where the ring was and discreetly take it from him! Why do you always have to complicate the simpler plans? And at the same time put our lives in jeopardy?”

She had never seen such a blue tinge in jade before. Truly an admirable piece. Yeshe would have loved it.

“Stop the drama, Jeffrey! Ekbeth is not going to kill us! We are going to wait a week or two, then send him a little note.”

“And where are you planning to make the swap? How?”

“We’ll find the perfect solution in the coming weeks, I’m sure! Now, are you not going to compliment me for having snapped up this little beauty?”

He looked, right now, more like he could strangle her. “Compliment? I still don’t know how you managed this magic, Shona, but I know this was child’s play for you. So—no, sorry—no compliment!”

He was slowly recovering from the shock, she could see. He extended his hand toward her. “May I?”

She handed the piece of jade over to him. He examined it closely. “It is indeed beautiful, and ancient.”

He wanted to return the stone to her but she shook her head. “You keep it. In our safe at the Castle. Until we figure out a plan!”

“But you’re coming with me back to the Castle, aren’t you?”

She sighed. “I wish. Unfortunately, I promised Maire to

help with one of her projects. Something to do with checking the quality of a rock group, if I got it correctly. I have to go to London.”

He nodded, then suddenly grinned. “And what are you going to tell Maire about this evening, tell? She is going to be mad at you!”

Shona winced. Not that she hadn’t thought of that already. “She won’t, as long as you don’t spill it out to her! She sent us to make a little investigation. That’s just what we did!”

“Ah! She won’t buy it! She knows of our plan. And I’m sure some of the guests tonight are her customers. If not me, someone will tell her.”

“Her customers won’t make the connection between Maire and me.”

“But they’ll certainly gossip about the woman who left the party for a full hour in Ekbeth’s company!”

Then his eyes went huge. “The invitation, Shona! Ekbeth is going to find out through the invitation what happened and go to Maire.”

Damn! Jeffrey was right, of course. It was too late to give the stone back now. It had seemed the perfect plan at the time, but she was not so sure anymore.

She needed to warn Maire. Her friend was not going to take that bit of news calmly. The thought certainly gave her a headache.

Bad choice again.

“I’ll figure out something, Jeffrey.”

STANDING CLOSE TO the windows of his private rooms, Ekbeth looked at the view outside. The exquisite beauty of the lake beneath him and the surrounding mountains was normally a sure way to soothe whatever mood he was in.

Not today though. Right now, it only brought the memory of Shona standing at this very spot. And what she had done to him.

Outwardly, he was showing his usual self, confident and quiet. Inwardly, he was seething.

She had fooled him. Completely.

Of all the things she could have stolen, she had to take the Annilis jewels—the very jewels his long-dead ancestor Taralieni had saved from destruction when all the rest had been destroyed, so many millennia ago. Those jade pieces were his people's only link to their glorious and ancient past. Even in the worst parts of their history, they had never lost them. Until today.

If only he had brought them back immediately to the Valley instead of putting them in his safe. He sighed. Ifs were not going to help him out of this. Getting back the jewels

before the start of the Aras'arisidz was what he had to do. Which gave him less than a week.

It was, in fact a small blessing that he had discovered the theft so quickly. He had wanted to study the jewels before going to work. It was not every day that he had the opportunity to have a close look at the craftsmanship of his long-deceased ancestors.

Not finding the jewels in their box has not raised immediate panic. No, that had started after he had discussed the disappearance with Kalem and his cousin Lyrian. They were the only other ones who had access to the safe. When they both denied having opened it, Ekbeth realized someone else may have had access to the safe. He had no idea how she would have managed that small feat, but there was no other explanation. He himself had given her a perfect opportunity to commit her crime by inviting her upstairs.

Ekbeth suddenly remembered something one of his uncles had once told him, and he winced. Women would be his doom, the old fool had said. He was too soft with them. They were only scheming little devils, and he was blind to the fact.

The context had been different, but nonetheless quite pertinent right now. One hour of pleasure. If he could not get the jewels back in time, Ekbeth was going to pay for this short moment of fun with his life. Literally.

Behind him, reflected in the window, he could see Kalem's men looking for fingerprints all over his favorite room, leaving dark powder traces over his furniture. That angered him at least as much as the theft. The place would never be the same to him now. No matter how thoroughly

his cleaning lady worked to put everything back as it was, the memory of what had happened here would remain.

He felt like hitting something. Hard. He walked to Kalem, who was sitting at the table, scanning a long list of names—the guests of yesterday’s party. “Have you found her yet?”

Kalem shook his head. “I’ve run the list twice already. No Shona on it.”

Ekbeth frowned. This should not have been possible. They had taken every precaution possible with the invitations.

Kalem did not wait for his comment. “There must be a logical explanation. I will find her, Ekbeth.”

“I know you will.”

One of Kalem’s men approached them. “No fingerprints anywhere, sir.”

“Even on the safe?”

The man shook his head.

Kalem cursed, then looked at Ekbeth with a frown. “Your cleaning lady did a thorough job when she cleaned the room after you left it yesterday. Damn, I never thought I would complain about how good the woman is at her job, but today I certainly am.”

It was a small comfort to Ekbeth to see he was not the only one angry.

He could not stand the wait anymore. He needed to do something. Anything. There was not much he could do here. As Kalem had reminded him half an hour ago, it was not his job to go after criminals.

“I’m going to the bank, Kalem.”

Kalem only nodded and spoke quickly in his ever-present com. Ekbeth walked to the lift. By the time he reached

the garage under the house, his driver was waiting for him, along with a security man.

The ride to the center of Zurich was short, but getting out of the villa helped improve his mood. Just a tiny bit. By the time he got out of the car, in front of his main workplace, a discreet house in a quiet street just off the famous Paradeplatz, he was ready to tackle the daily tasks.

He walked directly to his office. Lyrian was nowhere to be seen. Probably meeting a customer somewhere.

His assistant, Orsina, was expecting him, and held out a stack of messages. She had not heard of the theft, of course. For her it was a day as any other. With a sigh, Ekbeth opened his computer, while listening to her.

There were decisions to be made. Kalem was good at his job, despite his grumpiness. Ekbeth had to leave the missing jewel matter to him and concentrate on the finances, earn money for his family. That was his job.

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When he came back to his home at the end of the day, Ekbeth found Lyrian and Kalem in the dining room, with three other security people. They were all looking at some computer screen, a few pages of paper spread around them. Kalem was staring at the screen, muttering names—names that his people were checking against the documents.

They were so focused on their task that they did not even acknowledge Ekbeth's entrance.

“Evening, gentlemen.”

Lyrian returned the greeting and, when Ekbeth was near enough, whispered, “They are going through the security tapes.”

Ekbeth frowned. There were no security tapes in his

private rooms. He had insisted. He did not care what Kalem's point of view was. Had the man disobeyed him?

Lyrian smiled. "Not what you think, Ekbeth. This one is the camera at the entrance. They are checking the guests' arrivals against the guest list."

Ekbeth was even more confused. "Why?"

Lyrian pointed at the papers.

"As you well know, all the guests received a personal invitation. Kalem had the invitations counted this morning. No extra piece of cardboard. Actually, we're missing a few. Which makes sense. Not everyone could come, and they don't always think of telling us. Kalem has now checked that. All the invitations are accounted for. We have them, or their owner has it because he or she did not come yesterday. Then Kalem checked all the names on the invitations we have. All of them were on the list!"

Ekbeth started to understand. "I thought the man charged with checking the invitations had a device with the guests' pictures to check their ID?"

"Correct. And they've interviewed him. He can't remember any anomalies. But there was no name linked to the pictures. The man scanned the invitation, the pictures were appearing on his screen and he just checked if the faces match. That was your decision to protect your guests' identity."

Ekbeth looked at the computer screen. "I never thought this would be a problem. So, what is Kalem doing now?"

"Matching the guest list to the faces again. Looking for the mistake. This man has an impressive memory, I must say. I could not name half of the people we were watching,

though some of them are very familiar, but Kalem just says the name as soon as he sees the face!”

Ekbeth had to smile at that. “He’d probably give you their birthdates and addresses if you asked him. He is very good at his job, Lyrian. Did you spend the whole afternoon here? I thought you were meeting that man in Paris today?”

Lyrian nodded. “Correct. The deal is done. I just arrived a few minutes before you, in fact.”

He paused briefly then shook his head. “The more I think about this, Ekbeth, the less sense it makes to me. How can she have opened the safe without leaving fingerprints all over it! You said she was left alone ten minutes max! Even with the safe combination, which I can’t believe she had, it’s an awful short time to open the safe, empty it and close it again!”

Ekbeth agreed. Shona had been quick to clean herself up and put her scant clothes back on, but he had not left her alone that long. She had been waiting on the sofa by the window when he returned to the main room. The safe was located on the other side of the room.

He had tried to remember whether she had seemed out of breath then, but he was not sure.

“Something else does not make sense, Lyrian. How many people knew I had those jewels in the safe? They were there only since yesterday morning!”

Lyrian frowned. “Well, the three of us and a few members of the staff. But surely you don’t...”

“No. All the staff has been working here for our family for years. I trust their honesty. So her knowing I had the jewels in that safe is something that really puzzles me.”

He was watching the screen from afar. There had been